

### **III. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY**

## **THE CONSOLIDATION OF DONATISM IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY**

**DRAGOȘ BOICU\***

**ABSTRACT.** The Donatist Movement represents a phenomenon that can be studied as a paradigm for the emergence of schisms and their evolution from a canonical-disciplinary deviation to a dogmatic-moral one, transforming the dissident group into a heretical one. This study aims to deepen the way in which the resistance of the Numidian clergy was consolidated during the Constantinian dynasty despite the concessions and pressures exerted on it.

**Keywords:** Constantine the Great, North Africa, Donatism, Donatus Magnus, circumcelliones

The Church was considered from the very beginning a theandric institution, wanted, founded and led by God, infallible in its own right as an extension of the Body of Christ – its head; even so, throughout history it was faced with a problem common to all living organisms: mutation. Of course, we do not refer in this case to the sudden appearance of a new genetic character that reflects a modification of the hereditary material, but rather to a fundamental change in structure, whether disciplinary, liturgical or dogmatic. Since the very first century of the Christian era, a series of communities have emerged, with their own particularities that distanced them from the kerygma taught by the Apostles in the Near East and the Mediterranean Basin. Leaving aside for a moment the formal distinction between heresy and schism, we notice that the tendency of fragmentation is a constitutive feature of Christian religion, as the Saviour Himself said, ‘Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three’ (Luke 12: 51-52).

---

\* Assistant Professor, “Lucian Blaga” University, Sibiu, Romania. E-mail: [dragosbcu@yahoo.com](mailto:dragosbcu@yahoo.com).

Paradoxically, the protection Emperor Constantine the Great and his successors provided for Christianity further favoured the spread of this phenomenon in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the most serious divisions that affected the Church once the persecutions ceased was the Donatist schism.

Against the backdrop of the dissensions surrounding the succession for the Episcopal Seat of Carthage, two groups were formed and both claimed jurisdiction over the entire African Christianity: the Donatists – the supporters of Majorinus – and the so-called Catholics / Orthodox – who supported Caecilian as the legitimate successor of Bishop Mensurius<sup>1</sup>. In order to resolve the conflict, the Numidian or Donatist clergy repeatedly appealed to Emperor Constantine the Great, who ordered the examination of the complaints made against Bishop Caecilian by four synods (Rome – 313, one in Africa the same year, Arles – 314, Milan – 316), favouring the decisions of the latter. However, the rigorist faction of the Donatists asserted itself in northern Africa, gaining numerous followers who were breaking the communion with the Caecilianists and isolating themselves from all those suspected of being *traditores* or in any relationship with them.

### **The first persecutions against the Donatists**

The repeated pleas of the Donatists for the Emperor to intervene had inevitably impacted the community from the perspective of the property law, since as he was in favour of Bishop Caecilian the Emperor was now bound to seize Donatist churches and give them to the Catholics, who considered the rightful owners of ecclesiastical buildings in North Africa.

After several years of restricting the Donatists' activity, Constantine found that he did not succeeded in causing them to abandon the schism, but on the contrary they endangered themselves even more, victimizing themselves and legitimizing their persistence through the cult dedicated to the martyrs killed accidentally during the evacuation operations of the churches given to the Catholics.

However, the events that unfolded between 316 and 321 are quite unclear and the lack of consensus among historians on this topic raises enduring doubts. Most scholars interpret the few sources recording this period as signs of an

---

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed genesis of donation, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952), and Brent Shaw, *African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Also see Pr. Prof. Nicolae Chifăr, "Mișcarea donatistă și politica religioasă constantiniană (The Donatist Movement and Constantine's Religious Policy)", *Revista Teologică*, no. 4 (2012): 129-130, and Daniel Nicolae Vălean's contribution, *Erezii, controverse și schisme în creștinismul secolelor I-XI* (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2009), 74-78.

atrocious persecution of Donatists launched by imperial troops, on Constantine's orders. But apart from the letter addressed to Eumalius *Vicar* (November 316) and the Donatist text of *Passio Sancti Donati*, we have no other evidence to prove these persecutions took place<sup>2</sup>. The restitution of the churches was undoubtedly carried out with great difficulty and often by force, but imperial forces sent by Emperor Constantine were instructed to use only the clubs to implement his disposition [*qui non gladiis sed impia fustium caede trucidabantur*]; this detail stresses even more his intention to take over the edifices without killing Donatists. This testimony is given by the already mentioned Donatist text, which among other pieces of information also reports the death of a cleric in the most accidental circumstances: Bishop Honoratus of Sicilibba's throat was 'gashed' by tribune's sword during a *mêlée*<sup>3</sup>.

This view seems to be supported by Optatus of Mileve, who recalls the numerous Donatist petitions against the killings caused by Paul's and Macarius's missions in Carthage, Bagai and Nova Petra (in 347), but the schismatics didn't blame Leontius and Ursacius who had coordinated the restitutions between 317 and 321. There is therefore no solid evidence that systematic retaliation had taken place in that interval, but only moderate implementation of the imperial provisions that stipulated the transfer of churches to Catholic clergy and the exile of riotous Donatist bishops<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the measures taken by Constantine, the dissidents strengthened their position by taking advantage of the clashes with law enforcement to legitimize their victimhood, while the Emperor and the Caecilianist clergy were considered agents or associates of Satan for having used money and various favours to lure the Donatists and break their resistance<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, before 321 they addressed a document to Constantine the Great in which they categorically rejected any kind of communion with Caecilian and his supporters. This caused the Emperor to suspend any attempt to restore unity to the church in Africa, as the path of dialogue had never been opened<sup>6</sup>, while the Donatists maintained their position with the same obstinacy as before 314.

Therefore, Constantine published a rescript of tolerance with which, without accepting their demands, he suspended their persecution and recognized the

<sup>2</sup> Noel Lenski, "Constantine and the Donatists. Exploring the Limits of Religious Toleration", in *Religiöse Toleranz. 1700 Jahre nach dem Edikt von Mailand*, Martin Wallraff (Hg.), Colloquia Raurica (Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 108 sqq.

<sup>3</sup> *Passio Donati*, VII, PL 8: 755: "episcopi jugulum tribuni gladius non penetravit, tamen compunxit".

<sup>4</sup> See: Éric Fournier, "Constantine and Episcopal Banishment: Continuity and Change in the Settlement of Christian Disputes", in *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity*, ed. Julia Hillner, Jörg Ulrich and Jakob Engberg (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), 47-66.

<sup>5</sup> Noel Lenski, "Constantine and the Donatists", 123.

<sup>6</sup> Noel Lenski, "Constantine and the Donatists", 112.

existence of a massive rupture in the north African Church. Consequently, he summoned the Donatist clergy back from exile and proclaimed a relative religious freedom in Africa; then on 5 May 321 he sent Verinus, *vicarius Africae*, a letter informing him of the provisions of the rescript of tolerance.

However, until the heavenly cure takes its effect, we must keep our plans behind so that we would cultivate patience and endure everything through the virtue of tranquillity (*totum tranquillitatis virtute toleremus*) no matter what they might try or do in their arrogance through the practices of intemperance. Do not reward evil with injustice (Rm. 12: 17), for we really need to serve God, lest we be fools to take revenge into our own hands (Rm 12: 19) especially when our faith should give us the certainty that anything that we endure from such people because of their madness, will count to God as a martyrdom<sup>7</sup>.

This passage from the letter addressed to the African bishops expresses the same frustration and helplessness of the Emperor in his attempt to persuade the Donatists to renounce the schism, although he has made repeated concessions and even tried to force them to acknowledge Caecilian. He deprived them of the places of worship and exposed them to a harsher treatment, hoping that the deprivations will make them more conciliatory or even cause them to give up their opposition to the Church from which they have separated, bringing them back to Constantine's much desired unity.

But the edict of 5 May 321 has facilitated the spread of Donatists throughout North Africa. It seems that in this context the actions of schismatics became more daring and culminated in the rebellion led by Axido and Fasir, 'duces sanctorum', who terrified the rural areas and threatened the public order until they were repressed by comes Taurinus<sup>8</sup>. We must mention that this is the first case in which a certain form of Christianity identified itself with a national movement, the religious opposition to Rome having a strong political correspondent<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Epistola Constantini Imperatoris ad episcopos* (321) in H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 1913, reed. by H.v. Campenhausen, *Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen*, 122, (Berlin, 1950), 52: "Verum dum caelestis medicina procedat, hactenus sunt consilia nostra moderanda ut patientiam percolamus et, quicquid insolenta illorum pro consuetudine intemperantiae suae tentant aut faciunt, id totum tranquillitatis virtute toleremus. Nihil ex reciproco reponatur iniuriae (Rm 12, 17); vindicta enim quam deo servare debemus (Rm 12, 19) insipientis est manibus usurpare, maxime cum debeat fides nostra confidere quicquid ab Huiusmodi hominum furore patietur martyrii gratia apud deum esse valiturum".

<sup>8</sup> Optatus de Mileve (Afrus), *De Schismate Donatistarum Adversus Parmenianum*, Libri VII, III, 4, CSEL 26, ed. Carol Ziwsa, (Viena, 1893), 82.

<sup>9</sup> See the position of Brent Shaw, *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 54-55.

It is obvious that the Emperor disapproved of the Donatist position, and we may say that, as schismatics remained unwavering in their beliefs formulated immediately after Caecilian's election as Bishop of Carthage, Constantine the Great also firmly maintained his prejudice expressed as early as 312 when he accused them of 'still abiding in their madness'<sup>10</sup>. The concessions made to the dissidents came at the price of a condescending tone and the construction of a rhetoric of disapproval, both elements that can be identified in the epistle sent by Constantine to the African bishops in 330<sup>11</sup>, the last piece in the Donatist dossier during his reign. This text expresses even more clearly the emperor's disapproval, when he does not hesitate to characterize Donatus's supporters as mad, stubborn, sick, and satanic. The emperor's disgust becomes even plainer from his order that the Numidian Catholic bishops should no longer try to regain the Church in Cirta, abusively occupied by the Donatists, assuring them that he will build a new church for them, asking in return to sever all connections with these dissidents lacking common sense and openness for dialogue. On the contrary, they must be left in God's hands:

Indeed, the judgment of the Most High God is seen from this greater and more righteous situation, that He is so tolerant of such people, and condemns with patience all the iniquities which they commit, bearing them, since God promised that He is the Vindicator of all<sup>12</sup>.

Of course, the relaxation of the restrictions on Donatists could be seen in the wider context of the Roman Empire's internal policy, and especially in connection to the conflicts between Constantine the Great and Licinius. Thus, one can notice that when the first animosities between the two emperors appeared in 314-316, Constantine chose the path of dialogue and councils, and after the end of the civil war, Constantin intervened more brutally in the Donatist issue and, not being pressed by other factors, he allowed some small disturbances in North Africa. However, in 321, the tensions between Licinius and his brother-in-law resurfaced after Constantin violated the provisions of the 316 A.D. peace treaty, sending troops in Licinius's territories in pursuit of some Sarmatians who had invaded his territories. The situation was repeated a few months later when Constantine attacked the Goths who devastated Thrace, which is why the emperor

---

<sup>10</sup> *Epistola Constantini Imperatoris ad Caecilianum*, in H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Epistola Constantini ad episcopos Numidas*, in H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 53-56.

<sup>12</sup> *Epistola Constantini ad episcopos Numidas*, in H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 55.

of the East accused him of violating the treaty and began preparations for a new civil war. This time Constantine needed to ensure the loyalty of the African provinces, especially since that region provided the wheat supplies necessary to Rome and the whole of Italy.

Coincidentally or not, the intervals of political conflict correspond to those in which Emperor Constantine the Great appeared to be conciliatory, although he was aware of the Donatists' errors and was frustrated by the stubbornness with which they supported their cause. However, after the year 324, when he became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire, Constantine did not resume the persecution of schismatics, a decision influenced by the aggravation of the Arian crisis that led to the convocation of the First Ecumenical Synod (Nicaea, 325) but also by his strong conviction that the Donatist opposition consolidated in the last decade could be shaken only by divine judgment, as it transpires from the two Constantinian texts in 321 and 330.

What stands out is the conviction of the Donatists that they are the 'sons of martyrs' who make up the 'Church of Truth'. This conviction emphasizes the ability to build an identity around the notion of martyrdom in an era in which, at least theoretically, there was no conflict between Christianity and Empire. However, using any occasion that antagonized the authorities, they missed no opportunity to appear as victims of an aggression of the emperor, who proved to be no better than the persecutors Diocletian and Galerius, while the Donatists were the rightful descendants of the martyrs and did not hesitate to become martyrs themselves when the situation required it. The authority accumulated through the sacrifice of the dissidents gave the Donatist group a special impulse, but also a typical self-sufficiency that further strengthened the arrogance of the 'few chosen', radicalizing them on a path far from the evangelical precepts. Once engaged in this radical dynamic that escalated daily in increasingly absurd situations, presented as tests to be overcome with the same obstinacy, the schismatics ended up committing horrible atrocities that had nothing in common with the spirituality and the liturgical-dogmatic thesaurus that they claimed to protect.

### **The evolution of Donatism during the reigns of the sons of Constantine the Great**

The death of great Constantine left a deep void in the political life of the Roman Empire, but this did not stop the transformation of the Mediterranean space into a society in which the Christian element was dominant. This evolution would prove to be full of contrasts and paradoxes. The empire was divided between the sons of 'Constantine: Constantine II (337-340), Constantius II (337-361) and

Constans (337-350) – as follows: ‘he allocated to the eldest his grandfather’s portion (Galia, Britania and Spain with Mauritania Tingitana), to the second the government of the east (Egyp, Orient, Asia and Pons), and that between them (Italia, Africa, Pannonia, Illyricum and Tracia) to the third’<sup>13</sup>.

The Peace of the Empire would soon be disturbed when the step-brothers of the great Constantine, Julius Constantius, Dalmatius, Hannibalius, and all the male descendants of ‘Theodora’s lineage’ – the legitimate wife of Emperor Constantius (I) –, would be massacred. Just Galus and Julian, children then, remained alive. The historian Philostorgius, acknowledged for his Arian penchant, wishing to justify this act, whose main beneficiary was Constantius (II), states that these bloody measures were reprisals against those who were rumoured to have poisoned the great Constantine, because his death was not natural at all<sup>14</sup>.

However, the shedding of blood was not enough to restore political balance. The return to the form of polyarchic government would prove difficult as conflicts soon arose between the three brothers. While Constantius was forced to cope with the Persians in the Orient, the conflict between Constans and Constantine II broke out in the West. However, Constans did not tolerate Constantine’s interference for a long time, which is why he would try to consolidate his autonomy. Consequently, Constantine, wishing to restore order, invaded Constans’s territories at the beginning of the year 340, but in his march through Italy, still faithful to the emperor of Sirmium, he faced strong resistance from the population, and in the course of the Battle of Aquileia in 340, Constantine was killed, and his body was thrown into the waters of the Elsa River, near the city<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, Constans became sole ruler of the entire West. Together with Constantius, he increased the provisions of the legislation favourable to Christians and was particularly involved in ecclesiastical issues owing to the Arian crisis, but just like his father, he postponed baptism to the end of life, a proof that Christianity had no special meaning yet for the political life of the Empire.

Supporters of the two Christian factions, Nicean and Semi-Arian, Constans and Constantius would have tense relations, but the external pressures of the Franks on the Danubian and Renan frontiers and of the Persians in the East prevented the escalation of violence between the two brothers. The field of doctrinal battle between Semi-Arianism and orthodoxy was for now Illyricum, where a whole series of synods (Sardica 343, Sirmium 348, 351, 357) were

---

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, introduction, translation, and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford, New York, 1999), 172-173.

<sup>14</sup> Robert M. Franks, “The Dynasty of Constantine Down to 363”, in *The Cambridge companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 99.

<sup>15</sup> Dumitru Tudor, *Figuri de împărați romani*, vol.2 (București: Ed. Enciclopedică Română, 1974), 92.

organized. Their purpose was to reach a consensus: the condemnation of pure Arianism. Regarding these councils, we should note the special support that Constantius gave the Semi-Arian bishops.

The balance struck in this fashion between the two Christian groups would be destroyed with the proclamation of Flavius Magnetius Maximus as emperor in the West and the murder of Constans in the year 350. Convinced that he was following his father's dream, Constantius's goal was to rebuild the territorial unity of the Empire, but also to restore religious peace. Therefore, after pacifying the Persian frontier, he personally came to Illyricum the following year, on the one hand to support the Semi-Arian party at the Sirmium Synod of 351, and on the other hand to follow the usurper's actions and to organize the offensive against him. The first confrontation between the two would take place in the same year at Mursa, where Magnetius's troops would be defeated, while the usurper would be chased for two more years until he killed himself at Lugdunum in Gaul<sup>16</sup>. Thus, Constantius ruled alone over the entire Empire<sup>17</sup>.

For the Church of Africa, the civil wars of the period 340-353 represented a time when the Donatist dissidents became stronger: they had crystallized their opposition to everything that meant *ecclesia traditorium*, and a significant role in consolidating their stance was played by a strange mixture of self-victimization and violent outbursts. The dissidence of bishop Donatus and his clergy took the form of a serious intransigence, affirmed as an absolute refusal to compromise, but proved to be a symptom of self-sufficiency that was an equally impure motivation<sup>18</sup>.

The radicalism promoted by Donatus Magnus was extremely attractive, so about 300 African bishops recognized his authority, and by the end of the reign of Constantine the Great, 270 bishops were reunited in a synod at Carthage under Donatus's presidency, where they debated for 75 days over the validity of the Sacraments performed by the *traditores* clergy. According to the views of Saint Cyprian, the validity of the Sacraments was closely related to the moral state or the worthiness of the minister. Although during two and a half months of discussion there was no definitive decision, Donatus supported the rebaptism of all the Caecilianists who were in communion with him, as there was no valid baptism outside this communion. This view would be embraced and applied by the other bishops, although there have been exceptions such as the situation faced by Bishop Deuterius of Macri in Mauritania<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup> John Meyendorff, *Imperial unity and christian divisions. The Church 450-680 A.D.* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Tudor, *Figuri de împărați romani*, 98-100.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Pleșu, "Un dialog despre curaj și compromisuri" (I) <https://pressone.ro/andrei-ple-su-la-70-de-ani-un-dialog-despre-curaj-si-compromisuri-i/>, accessed May 20, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Augustin, *Epistola* 93, 43, *PL* 33:329-330.



Consequently, the moment of Constantine the Great's death found Donatus reinforcing his authority, while Caecilian's descendants at the helm of the Church of Carthage remained unknown for almost a quarter of a century<sup>20</sup>.

Besides, with a few exceptions, the authority of Bishop Donatus was recognized in all African provinces, and his recognition as the head of Carthage – and, therefore, as the primate of all Roman Africa – was even intended by Emperor Constans<sup>21</sup>. The dull presence of Gratus, the Caecilianist bishop of Carthage, had also greatly contributed to the strengthening of the Donatist element, as well as to the generalization of the schismatic state by the isolation of all those suspected of being *traditores* or in any relationship with them.

It seems that it was not only an ecclesiastical separation, but also a social one in which the contacts between the two parties were limited to personal attacks and sometimes street violence. Although it is tempting to make a simplistic association between certain social strata that have embraced Donatism or remained in communion with the Church of Rome and the Caecilianist clergy, there can be no precise element overlapping the religious option with a particular environment, or with a certain political orientation. On the contrary, in the absence of real opposition, Donatism was embraced by both citizens and slaves, by the inhabitants of the big cities, and the rural areas, by intellectuals and farmers alike.

In the same period, the Donatist faction developed from a patrimonial point of view, with many properties being acquired, which, according to historian William Hugh Clifford Frend, was rather the symptom of the loss of the initial enthusiasm that the Donatist Movement had as a spontaneous reaction of opposition against those who betrayed Christ, and as a result of the development of a specific routine of an institutionalized organism<sup>22</sup>. These changes, as well as the differences of opinion among the main leaders of this group, have caused successive fragmentations resulting in six factions: Rogatists – the most moderate, Urbanists, Claudianists, Primianists, Maximianists, and Circumcellions.

The latter, also called 'Agonistici' or 'fighters', were a radical Donatist group made up largely of nomadic Berbers and day-labourers who were working 'with their bent back and sweaty temples'<sup>23</sup>. They are mentioned by Augustine as peasants or agricultural workers (*agrestes*) who have abandoned their plots and now spread fear on the great properties<sup>24</sup>, the landlords being perceived as Satan's

<sup>20</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 168.

<sup>21</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 169.

<sup>22</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 170.

<sup>23</sup> Optatus de Mileve, *Libri VII*, V, 7, 135-136: "qui curvato dorso et desudatis lateribus sinus terrae faciat".

<sup>24</sup> Augustin, *Contra Gaudentium*, I.28.32, PL 43:725.

agents<sup>25</sup>. As a result, the actions of the Circumcellions had both religious and economic nature, and they directed their aggression against the so-called *traditores*, but also against the great creditors and the owners of large agricultural lands.

However, the aspect of social revolution was secondary, Circumcellions being fanatics ultimately, who had abandoned sedentary living to stray through different villages, living from the work of those they were indoctrinating with extremist principles. The Circumcellion appellation is derived from the 'circum-cella' formula, indicating that these radical Donatists were nourished near the small rural temples, converted in Christian chapels or around the sanctuaries raised on the tomb of a martyr or saint. Their activity was predominantly carried out in the countryside in the form of a perpetual pilgrimage: living temporarily around the graves of the saints, they were emphasizing the vocation of every Christian – a traveller of this life, 'for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come' (Heb. 13, 14). But even so, some centres could be found from where the actions of the Circumcellions were coordinated. These centres were located in the rural area of northern Numidia in the so-called *castella* (fortifications) of Fussala and Sinitum<sup>26</sup>.

Nomadic life and the devotion to martyrs have facilitated the formation of their own and distorted conception of martyrdom within Circumcellion groups, which these Donatists were too readily willing to embrace. In fact, it was the expression of a general ennui caused by the lack of social and / or material outlook for these disenfranchised groups, due to the social inequities specific to the ancient society. This general state of dissatisfaction created a psychological availability for martyrdom, also prepared by ritual dances as well as libations that degenerated into Bacchic orgies, meant to intercede the blessing and power of martyrs buried in the places that were now populated by Circumcellions. Clad in monochrome colours, as Isidor of Seville remembers<sup>27</sup>, they rushed upon the unfortunate victims, agitating up the fearsome clubs Augustine said Circumcellions used to threaten their enemies, although,

'neither Christ nor the emperor can be shown to have allowed this: the private use of clubs and firebrands, and this illegal madness. because it's written: "sheathe the sword" (Mat. 26, 52), they think there's no crime in using clubs! Not so that someone should be killed (of course) but so that they might be badly beaten and then later die, having suffered from long

---

<sup>25</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution the Early Church. A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 556.

<sup>26</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 172-173.

<sup>27</sup> Isidor, *De officiis ecclesiasticis*, II, 15, PL 83:796-797: "Circumcellionum, qui habitu monachorum usquequaque vagantur".

torture. but if they had pity, they could kill with one blow of their clubs. They call their clubs "israels" because God held this name in honour, but they shame the name more than the bodies they have beaten'<sup>28</sup>.

The text reflects both the determination of those who called themselves 'milites Christi', and the caution in the act of violence, using 'non-lethal' weapons, their possession being allowed by the authorities. However, this did not diminish the aggressiveness with which the Circumcellions supported and imposed their doctrinal and social viewpoint, but on the contrary, it increased the devotion to the martyrs and martyrdom. Thereupon they sought to provoke the Roman legions in order to be killed and be sent among the saints<sup>29</sup>, shouting as they went to death 'Deo laudes!' (a formula that inevitably leads us to the more recent use of 'Allahu akbar', shouted by the authors of the suicide bombings).

Suicidal attacks are attested both by Donatist and Catholic sources. Thus, Tyconius († 423), a Donatist sympathizer, eventually excommunicated for his various views on the rebaptism of the Caecilianists, said of the Circumcellions that 'they do not live in the same manner as other brothers do, but kill themselves as if for love of martyrdom, so that when they depart from this life they might be called martyrs'<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, Saint Philastrius, the Bishop of Brescia († ca. 397), informs us that 'in Africa there are those called *circuitoires*, who surround the domains and gather those whom they discover on the road to be killed by those saying that they want to suffer martyrdom, and that is why many have sometimes committed robberies. However, being put to tortures, they endure the evil destruction of the misfortune, and some of them are violently killed. They are rushing to perish without reason and are defying drawbacks to receive an honourable death, but instead of cleansing themselves, they get even more entangled in the future judgment of God'<sup>31</sup>.

---

<sup>28</sup> Augustin, *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, 147, 154–162 (PL 43:28): "Vos enim non vultis pacem. Illi minantur de fuste... Non Christus, non imperator haec probatur permisisse, / fustes et ignes privatos et insaniam sine lege. / Quia scriptum est *Reconde gladium*, scelus non putant in fuste, / non ut homo moriatur, sed ut conquassetur valde / et postea moriatur inde, iam cruciatus in languore. / Sed tamen si miserentur, occident et uno fuste. / Fustes Israheles vocant quod Deus dixit cum honore, / ut plus vastent ipsum nomen quam corpus quod caedunt inde".

<sup>29</sup> cf. John Joseph A'Becket, "Agonistici", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), accessible at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01223a.htm>. (3.03.2019). See also, Claude Lepelley, "Iuvenes et circoncellions: les derniers sacrifices humains de l'Afrique antique", *Antiquités africaines*, vol. 15 (1980): 261-271.

<sup>30</sup> Tyconius: "Et isti non vivunt aequaliter ut ceteri fratres, sed quasi amore martyrum semetipsos perimunt, ut violenter de hac vita discedentes et martyres nominentur", in Traugott Hahn, *Tyconius Studien. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1900), 68.

<sup>31</sup> Philastrius, *Diversarum Haereseon Liber*, 85 (PL 12: 1197-1198).

A first conflict involving the Circumcellions broke out in 340 and the Imperial reaction did not delay; anticipating the creation of a centrifugal movement centred on the Donatist dissidence, towards the end of Emperor Constans's reign (337-350), there was a new attempt to liquidate the schism. Therefore, in 347, the Edict issued in 317 was renewed in order for the Donatists to pass under the authority of the Caecilianist Bishop of Carthage, Gratus, and the opponents of the imperial judgment were threatened with harsh retaliation, while rigorous bishops were to be sent into exile (the case of Donatus Magnus), or even put to death through public execution (the case of Marculus and other 9 bishops).

As a result, Circumcellions constituted 'remarkable bands of nomadic terrorists, recruited haphazardly from the dregs of the population, from the discontented of every race and province, fugitive slaves, ruined farmers, oppressed colons, outlawed criminals, social failures, excommunicated Catholics, and purely religious fanatics'<sup>32</sup>. But although they were the avant-garde of the Donatist Church, for without the support of these 'gangs of savages' the Donatism would be crushed rapidly by imperial forces, the varied composition of this radical group and the unpredictability of the Circumcellions made the schismatic bishops sometimes disavow their actions, even if they used them as an instrument of hatred and revenge<sup>33</sup>. This became obvious during the uprising (340 A.D.) led by the 'captains of the saints', Fasir and Axido, who displayed remarkable sadism, terrorizing their victims, to whom they sent threatening letters describing the various kinds of tortures to which they would be subjected when they would catch the landlords<sup>34</sup>.

In fact, some of the Donatist bishops were so overwhelmed by the excesses of their allies that they met in a council<sup>35</sup> and complained to Taurinus that 'such people cannot be reformed within the Church'<sup>36</sup>, claiming they did not accept the ecclesiastical discipline and asked him to intervene for their pacification.

During this action led by Taurinus, many Circumcellions were repressed in the fairs where they met, and some of them lost their lives during the confrontations, as it happened at Octavia in Numidia. Those killed were immediately declared martyrs, and Clarus, the priest of Subbula, buried them in the church, giving them the honour that only the bishops normally enjoyed<sup>37</sup>. On this occasion, the Donatist bishops which took part at a council in Numidia have forbidden the burial of such people in the basilicas<sup>38</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> R. Pierce Beaver, "The Donatist Circumcellions", *Church History* 4, no 2 (1935): 125.

<sup>33</sup> Beaver, "The Donatist Circumcellions", 126.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, vol. 4 (Paris, 1912), 31.

<sup>35</sup> Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Optatus de Mileve, *Libri VII*, III, 4, p. 75: "dicuntur huiusmodi homines in ecclesia corrigi non posse".

<sup>37</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 176.

<sup>38</sup> Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, 32.

Despite their exaggerated claims to appear as defenders of the true faith, in the midst of these confrontations, the Donatists chose to flirt with the Arians as well. Thus, the African schism and the great Eastern heresy seemed to make a common front against the Orthodox/Catholic Church. This explains the sending of a copy of the acts of the Semi-Arian Council of Sardica or Philippopolis (343 A.D.) to Bishop Donatus Magnus. However, these occasional contacts with the Arians did not have any serious consequences for the doctrinal purity of the Donatists<sup>39</sup>.

The lack of influence of the new Catholic bishop of Carthage, Gratus, favoured the growth of the authority of Donatus Magnus of Casae Nigra, who claimed for himself the primacy of the African Church and the imperial recognition as the 'senior' Bishop of Carthage. The talks with Emperor Constans advanced far enough and it was even decided to send a delegation to Africa to investigate the situation and report it to the monarch who would approve Donatus's request.

The two imperial notaries, Paul and Macarius, arrived in Africa in the spring of 347 and manifested their sympathy with the Caecilianist clergy from the very beginning, participating in the service of Bishop Gratus. The African anarchy, the periodic brigandage of the Circumcellion and their Berber allies, the impertinence of the Donatists, the rapidity with which the dissident communities increased, but also the suspicious relations with the Arians, worried the representatives of the central power. Emperor Constans, however, believed himself to be sufficiently skilful and convincing to restore peace and suppress the African schism. That is why he tried to address the situation with delicacy, by luring the Donatists with significant material aids, to persuade them to return peacefully into the bosom of the Universal Church. Therefore, Paul and Macarius were considered to be the artisans of unity, tasked with preparing the unification of the two Churches, giving alms to communities and generous gifts to more influential Donatist bishops.

Donatus was resentful of the officials' attitude and when Paul and Macarius tried to get in touch with him to complete the investigation, the schismatic leader is said to have replied 'quid est imperatori cum ecclesia' (what has the Emperor to do with the Church?)<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, he ordered his subordinate clergy to ignore the delegation's requests or any help that the two notaries would give them. Also, to justify his attitude towards the Emperor's messengers, a rumour was started and spread, that during the Eucharistic celebration led by Bishop Gratus, they would put a statue of Constans on the altar and offered incense sacrifices<sup>41</sup>. This new element led to an even stronger antagonism of the masses who despised idolatry with all their souls and who associated Paul and Macarius with the persecution of Diocletian and the tetrarchy<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Optatus de Mileve, *Libri VII*, III, 3, p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> Optatus de Mileve, *Libri VII*, III, 12, p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 178.

Quickly understanding that they cannot reach any agreement with the Donatists, Paul and Macarius reported this to the Emperor, who had already received a reprimand from Donatus<sup>43</sup>. Consequently, in the middle of the year 347 Constans promulgated a union edict, commanding the merging of the two rival Churches, or, more precisely, the abolition of all schismatic communities and the transfer of the buildings and other goods to the Catholics.

On August 15<sup>th</sup> 347, a proconsular edict was published in Carthage, which included measures to enforce the imperial decree, which reprised the provisions of Constantine's document of 317: the confiscation of churches, the exile of Donatists bishops, and the ban on rebaptism<sup>44</sup>.

On this occasion, a Donatist named Maximianus tore up the document. As a result, he was detained and subjected to torture, while another dissident, Isaac, who had witnessed the incident and mocked the Catholics, was also arrested and tortured wildly, dying the same day. On the orders of the proconsul, the bodies of both Donatists were thrown into the sea, inciting the dissidents even more<sup>45</sup>.

After defeating the weak resistance around Carthage, Paul and Macarius went to Numidia, where as they advanced they were faced with increasing hostility. The feeling was fuelled by the rumour that the imperial notaries had the task of forcing the Donatists to sacrifice in front of Emperor Constans's statue. That is why, when Paul and Macarius arrived in isolated villages or farms they found them abandoned. Schismatics were grouping around Bishop Donatus of Bagai, who also called in the Circumcellion to strengthen this fortress, gathering supplies and preparing for an armed confrontation.

Taking this into account, Paul and Macarius did not hesitate to appeal to Silvestrus, *comes Africae*, asking for additional troops to confront the Circumcellions led by Donatus. The imperial army occupied the offensive positions and engaged the Donatists, avenging the tortures to which a group of military scouts had been subjected the night before. The officers could not do anything to stop their troops from devastating the Bagai citadel and its population. During the massacre, Bishop Donatus was captured and murdered, the schismatics immediately attributing him the quality of martyr and venerating him as such.

Demoralized by this defeat, the Donatist bishops gathered together in a council and decided to send ten bishops to Macarius to condemn the violence and to seek a solution to restore peace. The meeting with the Roman official took place in Vegesala, in the north of the Aures Mountains, but it failed. The Donatist bishops insulted Macarius, who immediately went into retaliation: he ordered the bishops be beaten publicly with clubs, then he released nine of them, while Marculus, the bishop who had stood out due to his unusual insolence,

<sup>43</sup> Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Bernard Nkoa Lebogo, *La querelle sur le baptême: Les divisions de l'Église chrétienne africaine* (Paris : Éditions L'Harmattan, 2011), 89.

<sup>45</sup> Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, 35-36.

was detained as a prisoner and paraded like a trophy through the places where Macarius travelled, inspiring fear among the Donatists. However, W.H.C. Frend and several other historians place the meeting between the dissident bishops and the Roman official on June 29<sup>th</sup> 347<sup>46</sup>, six weeks before the incident in Carthage, which would mean that the confrontation in Bagai took place earlier that summer, before the proconsular edict was published.

It is certain that Macarius has been able to appease the dissident communities by terror, putting an end to the resistance and preventing, at least for the time being, the future violence of the Circumcellions. Finally, when the imperial troops reached Nova Petra<sup>47</sup>, Marcus threw himself off the cliffs, or, according to Donatist sources, he was helped by soldiers to jump<sup>48</sup>. Schismatics immediately proclaimed him a martyr, honouring his relics and his memorial day with piety, and taking pilgrimages to the place where his life ended. In the autumn of 1933, during the archaeological excavations in Ksar el-Kelb (Algeria) – the old Vegesela settlement – the inscription ‘memoria domni Marchuli’ was found to the left of the Basilica’s nave, and since this building undoubtedly belonged to the Donatists, the researchers identified Marcus with the bishop killed during Macarius’s campaign<sup>49</sup>.

This violent march led by the ‘artisans of unity’ created a negative impression among both Donatists and Catholics who were ashamed to proclaim the union of the Church based on cruel acts committed especially by Macarius. In fact, the impact of these events on the North African collective mentality would be so significant that, from that point on, they would refer to the ‘Macarian Age’ (Macariana tempora) or ‘Macarian persecution’ (Macariana persecutio), and the Catholics would from then on be called the Macarians (macariani), the group of Macarius (pars Macari) or the Church of Macarius (Macariana Ecclesia)<sup>50</sup>. The Donatists would crystallize their non-violent opposition through writings belonging to the genre of Acta Martirica, meant to glorify the victims (*Passio Maximiani et Isaaci*<sup>51</sup> and *Passio Marculi*) and express contempt for the persecutors powerless to corrupt the pure souls of the martyrs. The Roman authorities are depicted as agents of the devil in the fight against the saints of God<sup>52</sup>. Emperor Constans was not spared by the authors of these texts that portrayed him as ‘the tyrant’ and ‘the forerunner of Antichrist’ (praecursor Antichristi)<sup>53</sup>. The two

---

<sup>46</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 179.

<sup>47</sup> Optatus, *Libri VII*, III, 6 and Augustin, *Contra Cresconium* III, 49, 54, state that Marcus was killed.

<sup>48</sup> *Passio Marculi*, PL 8:765.

<sup>49</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, “Domnus Marcus”, *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. 53 (1935): 81-89.

<sup>50</sup> Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique chrétienne*, 37-38.

<sup>51</sup> *Passio Maximiani et Isaaci* seems to be a letter addressed by someone named Macrobius to the dissidents. W.H.C. Frend identifies the author with the Macrobius the Donatist Bishop of Rome.

<sup>52</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 554.

<sup>53</sup> *Passio Marculi*, PL 8:761A: “de Constantis regis tyrannica domo et de palatii arce pollutum Macarianae persecutionis murmur increpui”.

beasts sent to Africa (duabus bestiis ad Africam missis<sup>54</sup>) show an unimaginable cruelty, and the merit of those who bear the suffering is even greater, as it is made cleared in this passage of *Passio Maximiani et Isaaci*:

“Thus there was the war between the flesh and the corporal punishment, between the profaners and the devotee, between the virtues of the soul and the mutilation, between the soldier of Christ and the soldiers of the devil, between the one who suffers and the judge, and, as he (Maximianus) fought so against them, he was worthy to fight even more gloriously with the multitude of sufferings and enemies, so that through one confrontation he would win more than a single victory’<sup>55</sup>.

For Donatists everywhere, the heroism displayed by the ‘martyrs’ legitimized their radical position even more, even if at that moment they could only be the helpless witnesses of this forced union. Donatus Magnus himself was forced to leave Carthage and Africa and lived in exile until his death in 355, and for this reason the dissidents proclaimed him a martyr fallen for the cause of the Church of the pure.

Despite the nominal victory achieved by the imperial troops, the Catholic Church failed to capitalize on this triumph, and Bishop Gratus of Carthage delayed seizing the impulse created by Paul and Macarius. In 348 or 349, Gratus convened a synod with 50 bishops, including some ‘repented’ Donatists, but he failed to assert himself as the leader of the African Church, as Aurelian or Augustin<sup>56</sup> would do several decades later. Apart from the 12 canons on ecclesiastical discipline – a sign of the laxity that appeared during the schism – two canons referred specifically to the Donatists: one forbidding the repetition of baptism (can. 1) and the other preventing the worship as martyrs of those who killed or consciously exposed themselves to situations that were fatal (can. 2)<sup>57</sup>.

The Donatists quickly recovered their lost positions, waiting for the right moment to manifest their ideas again. Even at the Synod of Carthage (348/349), the Catholic Bishop of Madauros complained that under the pretext of reconciliation and unification, the ‘repented’ Donatist Bishop stole his entire community, a situation commonly found in Numidia<sup>58</sup>, foreshadowing the rebellion of the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate.

---

<sup>54</sup> *Passio Marculi*, PL 8:761A.

<sup>55</sup> *Passio Maximiani et Isaaci*, PL 8:769: “Sic illic bellum gestum est inter corpus et poenas, inter sacrilegos et devotum, inter amini vires et lamiantes, inter millitem Christi et milites diaboli, inter patientem et iudicem et unus sufficit afflictus contra tantum dimicare suppliciorum hostiumque gloriosius multitudinem, ut in uno certamine non unam victoriam reportasset”.

<sup>56</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 183.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Joseph von Hefele, *A history of the councils of the church: from the original documents*, V, 70, vol. II, translated by Henry Nutcombe Oxenham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), 400-402.

<sup>58</sup> Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 184-185.



## Conclusions

Ironically, the ideal of unity of all in one great Eucharistic communion has transformed itself over time into one of the main causes of the Church's fragmentation in ever smaller entities, with almost irreconcilable standpoints. When the synodal path proved to be inadequate, both Emperor Constantine the Great and his successors tried to achieve the unity of the Church either by diplomatic means or by imposing an arbitrary decision by force. This has further contributed to the antagonism of the parties involved in the conflict. This situation proves over decades that secular authority has sometimes sought and defended the values of Christianity with great interest, while the pride of the clergy has deepened the crises of the Church. Under the pretext of excessive moral rigour, such clergy perpetuated the schism and even encouraged appalling atrocities which had nothing in common with the spiritual and the liturgical-dogmatic treasure they claim to protect, and unfortunately this kind of situations are still visible today.

## REFERENCES

- A'Becket, John Joseph. "Agonistici." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907.
- Augustin. *Contra Gaudentium*, I.28.32, PL 43:725.
- . *Epistola* 93, 43, PL 33:329-330.
- . *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, 147, 154–162 (PL 43:28).
- Beaver, R. Pierce. "The Donatist Circumcellions." *Church History* 4, no 2 (1935): 125.
- Bernard, Jacques. Lebogo, Nkoa. *La querelle sur le baptême: Les divisions de l'Église chrétienne africaine*. Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 2011.
- Chifăr, Nicolae. "Mișcarea donatistă și politica religioasă constantiniană (The Donatist Movement and Constantine's Religious Policy)." *Revista Teologică*, no. 4 (2012): 129-130.
- Delehay, Hippolyte. "Domnus Marculus." *Analecta Bollandiana* 53 (1935): 81-89.
- Epistola Constantini ad episcopos Numidas*. In H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 1913, reed. by H.v. Campenhausen, 53-56. Berlin, 1950.
- Epistola Constantini Imperatoris ad Caecilianum*. In H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 1913, reed. by H.v. Campenhausen, 8-9. Berlin, 1950.
- Epistola Constantini Imperatoris ad episcopos* (321). In H.v. Soden, *Urkunden zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Donatismus*, 1913, reed. by H.v. Campenhausen, 52. Berlin, 1950.
- Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, introduction, translation, and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall. Oxford, New York, 1999.
- Fournier, Éric. "Constantine and Episcopal Banishment: Continuity and Change in the Settlement of Christian Disputes." In *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity*. ed. Julia Hillner, Jörg Ulrich and Jakob Engberg, 47-66. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016.

- Franks, Robert M. "The Dynasty of Constantine Down to 363." In *The Cambridge companion to the Age of Constantine*, edited by Noel Lenski, 99. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Frend, W.H.C. *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*. Oxford, 1952.
- Hahn, Traugott. *Tyconius Studien. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen-und Dogmengeschichte des 4. Jahrhunderts*. Leipzig, 1900.
- Hefele, Karl Joseph von. *A history of the councils of the church: from the original documents*. V, 70, vol. II, translated by Henry Nutcombe Oxenham. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896.
- Isidor. *De officiis ecclesiasticis*, II, 15, PL 83: 796-797
- Lenski, Noel. "Constantine and the Donatists. Exploring the Limits of Religious Toleration." In *Religiöse Toleranz. 1700 Jahre nach dem Edikt von Mailand* edited by Martin Wallraff, Colloquia Raurica. Berlin /Boston: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Lepelley, Claude. "Iuvenes et circoncensions: les derniers sacrifices humains de l'Afrique antique." *Antiquités africaines*, vol. 15 (1980): 261-271.
- Meyendorff, John. *Imperial unity and christian divisions. The Church 450-680 A.D.* New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989.
- Monceaux, Paul. *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*. Vol. 4. Paris, 1912.
- Optatus de Mileve (Afrus). *De Schismate Donatistarum Adversus Parmenianum, Libri VII*, III, 4, CSEL 26, edited by Carol Ziwsa. Viena, 1893.
- Passio Donati*, VII, PL 8: 755.
- Passio Marculi*, PL 8: 765.
- Philastrus. *Diversarum Haereseon Liber*, 85 (PL 12: 1197-1198).
- Pleșu Andrei. „Un dialog despre curaj și compromisuri.” (I) <https://pressone.ro/andrei-ple-su-la-70-de-ani-un-dialog-despre-curaj-si-compromisuri-i/>, accessed May 20, 2019.
- Shaw, Brent. *African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- . *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Tudor, Dumitru. *Figuri de împărați romani*. Vol. 2. București: Ed. Enciclopedică Română, 1974.
- Vălean, Daniel Nicolae. *Erezii, controverse și schisme în creștinismul secolelor I-XI*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2009.
- W Frend, H.C. *Martyrdom and Persecution the Early Church. A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965.